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Chicago Magazine, April, 1990

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JOURNAL

A GOOD CHOICE OF ENEMIES

A mayor can be judged by the company he keeps—and the company he sends packing

by HILLEL LEVIN, *Editor*

IT IS NOT EASY BEING THE MAYOR OF A BIG CITY. WHEN THINGS GO badly, people you thought were friends pretend they don't know you. Worse yet, when things go well, people you would prefer not to know claim they're your best friend.

Such was the dilemma Mayor Richard M. Daley found himself in a few weeks back when Federal prosecutors released transcripts of a conversation between a government informant and Rocky Infelice, an alleged Mafia chieftain who had been indicted a few days earlier for racketeering. On the tapes, Infelice boasted that he played a crucial role in the Mayor's election when he talked a big-time real-estate investor out of backing the abortive campaign of GOP candidate Ed Vrdolyak.

The Mayor rushed to the airwaves to dissociate himself from Infelice, characterizing the man's assertions as "b.s." Lest any doubt remain about the Mayor's involvement with the Mob, the U.S. Attorney General, Richard Thornburgh himself, soon thereafter wrote a letter to Daley for one and all to see, apologizing that the embarrassing bit of gangster gas had leaked out to the public, and assuring him that he was not the target of a Federal investigation.

Alderman Fred Roti's political career should have been derailed long ago.

Of course, one can understand the Mayor's pique. He has been scrupulous about protecting his reputation throughout his political career in the state legislature and, later, the office of state's attorney. The man may have his faults, but dishonesty is apparently not one of them, and the squeaky-clean image played no small part in his election. The reform-minded types who once pulled the levers for Harold Washington may have realized that when they put another Daley in City Hall, they were bringing back some sort of machine, but at least they could tell themselves that this time the parts would be stainless.

And yet, while we feel confident about the integrity of the Mayor, we cannot be so sure about other officeholders in the city and county, and therein lies the rub for the Daley dynasty. As Ed Koch would be only too happy to acknowledge, it's not enough these days for big-city mayors to keep their own hands clean. They can be brought down just as easily by the foibles of others—even if they had nothing to do with appointing or electing those others.

Take, for example, one Fred Roti, alderman of the First Ward of the city of Chicago. He is the subject this month of an article by senior editor David Jackson, called *Family Business* (see page 114). According to knowledgeable sources, Roti is also a target in a Federal investigation of Mob influence in city government here. It was the alderman's favorite table at a restaurant opposite City Hall that was the focus of investigators' candid camera. The probe has been dubbed Operation Kaffeeklatsch, and we suspect that prosecutors found the conversation to be more than idle chitchat.

But whatever the revelations before the grand jury may be, Roti's political career should have been derailed long ago. The real scandal is that he's gone so far. Convictions in court should not be the only measure of our elected officials. There is also the issue of public trust, and Roti has violated that, time and again.

For years, reports have been rampant about Fred Roti's ties to the Mob. As Jackson shows, the connection to organized crime runs deep in his family, and while the sins of the fathers should not be visited on the sons, Roti has done nothing to dissociate himself from friends and relatives with criminal convictions. In fact, he may have helped some of them get city jobs and contracts.

Over the years Chicago's voters have shrugged off the Rotis in our midst as part of the price of living in a toddling town. Much of that philosophy is reflected in our tough-talking slogan: "The city that works" has not had to bother with niceties like ethics and anti-patronage laws. Instead, in return for decent city services, we were willing to ignore the ward heeling and political favoritism that supposedly made things work.

But today, as our tax bills skyrocket and essential services deteriorate, the city is no longer working as it did. Much of the fault lies with a bloated, patronage-ridden public work force—in other words, the Roti way of government.

Here is where the Mayor must go beyond his own protests of personal innocence and take an assertive stand against favoritism and corruption. Operation Kaffeeklatsch gives him a golden opportunity to revisit the ethics bill he pushed in the beginning of his term. This time he can fight to make it apply to aldermen as well. Whether or not he manages to ram through any additional laws, he can still press for an investigation into contracts and hiring linked to aldermen. At the very least, he can start treating Roti like the pariah he would be in virtually any other major city in this country.

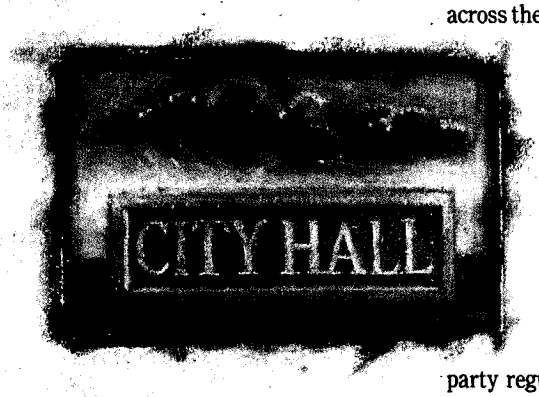
It goes without saying that there would be significant political risks for the Mayor if he did indeed pursue this course of action. But he has become that rare elected official with a solid enough mandate to take courageous action. More important, he would leave the city with a legacy that would long outlive his term of office, and unlike the legacies of his predecessors, this one wouldn't cost taxpayers a dime. ~

FAMILY BUSINESS

Extortion. Bombing. The Mob. And City Hall. This is the legacy of Chicago's Roti family. They fill essential city jobs. They'll probably be doing so well into the next century. And behind them all stands that enigmatic, powerful patriarch, Alderman Fred Roti.

So, I have relatives on the payroll. They're doing an excellent job. So what?

—Fred Roti



by David Jackson

FRED ROTI DOESN'T LOOK LIKE ONE OF THE city's most powerful political figures. He looks, even at 69, like a pug-nosed urchin of the old South Side. His hair is slicked back, his ears protruding like the handles of a jug. His shoes are spit-shined, cop-leather blue. And his voice still has that school-yard bray. High-pitched and abrasive, it spreads across the City Council chambers like a mix of helium and gravel.

He has an unspanked air about him.

But Roti's power is extreme.

He is alderman of the First Ward, the boundaries of which trace the heart of this metropolis, including the Loop and City Hall itself.

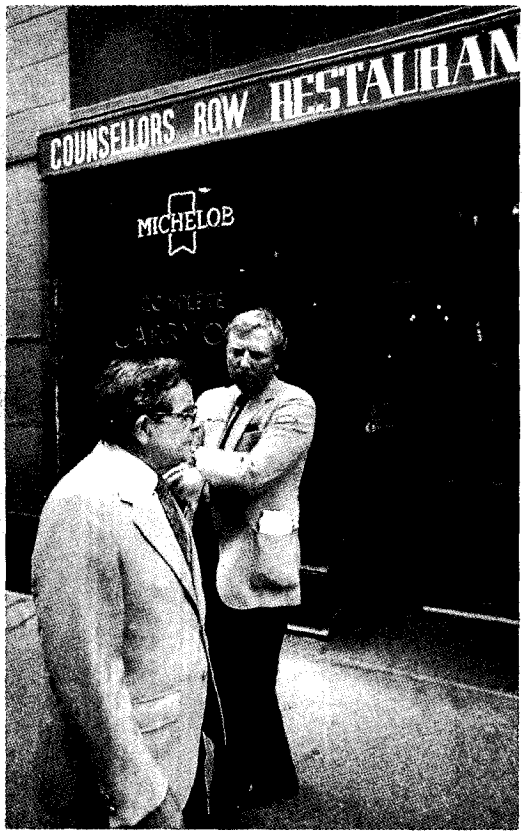
He votes first on the council floor, thus signaling to the other party regulars how they should cast their ballots. Once, by mistake, he voted aye instead of nay, and the others followed dutifully behind him.

His influence extends deep into the machinery of city government. Members of his family are crucial to the city's vast garbage hauling operations, help set policy for the Laborers Union (the union that represents workers in Streets and Sanitation), labor on Public Works and Water Department crews, walk the streets as police officers. A number of his relatives have held positions with the county sheriff and the clerk of the circuit court.

But Roti's power also has a dark, subterranean aspect to it: It has long been said that he has ties to organized crime.

Last July, the press revealed a major new Federal investigation into links between organized crime and leaders of the First Ward, including Democratic committeeman John D'Arco, Sr., businessman Pat Marcy, Sr., and Roti. According to press reports, the government used a phony name to rent an office above the La Salle Street Counsellors Row restaurant, where the First Ward honchos habitually lunch. The Feds ran a wire eight floors down an elevator shaft and into the booth opposite "Booth One." There they installed a camera that peered through a hole at Roti and his co-

illustrations: AL BRANDTNER



Roti has tried to cloak his extreme political power with a mantle of invisibility: He's never sought the press's attention. But his *low profile* was raised considerably last year, when he came under scrutiny by the FBI for possible ties to organized crime. The FBI investigation began with a video camera planted *near Roti's favorite* lunch booth at Counsellors Row.

horts slurping soup, kibitzing, conducting business of all kinds. The hole was large enough for a curious bus boy to poke his finger into one night. And thus "Operation Kaffeeklatsch" was exposed.

Sources confirm that Federal investigators are digging into a wide range of subjects—from potential judicial misconduct to charges of political protection of Chinatown gambling. They have subpoenaed some of the city's best-known elected officials to appear before a grand jury: Aldermen Ed Burke, Burton Natarus, and Anthony Laurino, in addition to Roti. As this issue went to press, sources were describing Roti as under investigation.

Of course, Roti has been the source of government scrutiny for decades. And voters keep electing him. The question is, why has this gone on so long? A look at his career reveals a man with long-standing ties to organized crime figures. Anyone willing to do a little digging will find court files on Roti and his family—a record of tavern brawls, flamboyant divorces, robbery, bookmaking, and even accusations of murder. This is the Roti family saga.

Seen in that light, Operation Kaffeeklatsch is just the tip of the iceberg.

More than anything, Alderman Fred Roti represents a way of life—the ancient, crummy way that gives a ward heeler the right to do a favor for the convicted felon in his family, that gives a disreputable man the widest leeway in the corridors of City Hall.

When he first ran for public office, 40 years ago, Fred Roti was described by *The Chicago Daily News* as a "candidate reputedly sponsored by Chicago's gambling syndicate." He greeted the charge with a wave of his hand and a jut of his chin. And that has been his attitude ever since. In 1981, Roti was confronted with the fact that 16 of his relatives were on the city payroll. He gave a typical response.

He said, "So what?"

THE ROTIS BEGAN ARRIVING IN CHICAGO AT the dawn of this century. "Basically, I think we all come from the same town in Italy,"

photography: top TOM CRUZE/*CHICAGO SUN-TIMES, bottom* RICH HEIN/*CHICAGO SUN-TIMES*

FAMILY BUSINESS

says Anthony Roti, of suburban Lombard, who describes himself as "a fifth or sixth cousin" of the alderman. That town is Reggio di Calabria, a dirt-poor farming settlement at the pointy tip of Italy's "boot."

Anthony, who was born in Reggio and grew up in Bridgeport, is quick to dissociate himself from the alderman's family, which settled in an Italian enclave in what is now Chinatown. "They were a certain clique," he says. "Those guys all got the city jobs. I was never part of that circle. My dad was never affiliated with his dad."

Fred Roti's dad, Bruno, was famous in the old neighborhood. He's referred to in news clippings and history books, usually as a member of "La Mano Nera"—the Black Hand—a loosely organized society that held its own Italian communities in thrall with flowery, legalistic extortion letters and a constant use of bombs. ("I beg you warmly to put [$2,000] on your door within four days," one letter said; "if not, I swear not even the dust of your family will exist.") The Chicago police registered more than 300 Black Hand bombings in the first quarter of this century, and none of them were solved. Outside the neighborhood, the Black Hand was viewed with contempt. At least pickpockets and burglars risk a confrontation with their victims, the *Herald & Examiner* editorialized in 1925, while the Black Hand bomber "is a beast who lurks in ambush and never destroys unless he feels himself absolutely safe."

In 1928, property records show, Bruno's wife pledged a modest three-flat they owned in the heart of present-day Chinatown as security to guarantee the bail of James Belcastro, who had been charged with kidnaping, conspiracy, and assault with attempt to murder. Belcastro was the most famous of the Black Handers—he was notorious for attempting to gun down one of Capone's top henchmen, then joining the Capone gang and getting mixed up in the murder of a reform-minded 20th Ward aldermanic candidate. (Belcastro was tried in that case but acquitted.) He was featured in the city's first "public enemies" list, posted by the Chicago Crime Commission in 1923.

Five more times in the 1930s, property records show, Bruno's wife scrawled her signature—a crude "X"—on documents pledging their home as bail collateral for men accused of crimes. Another building owned by the family, on South Wells Street, was almost continually in hock to the state: County property records show that, in eight years, it was used for bail 15 times.

The records of other buildings in the neighborhood are even more startling: In 1931, county documents indicate, a neighboring undertaker, grocer, and tailor put up their properties as security for bail when Bruno Roti was indicted for murder, along with Belcastro and three other men. The records do not describe the case at all, except to state that within weeks, the liens against the neighbors' houses were released by the state. Bruno had either surrendered to authorities, been discharged, or won his case. That August, records show, he was arrested for murder again, and his neighbors again rallied to guarantee his bail. This time, he evidently surrendered to authorities, though the records do not indicate the disposition of his case.

In subsequent years, Bruno purchased a number of parcels in the neighborhood. He also became a power in First Ward politics—a *padrone* who doled out city jobs to immigrant Italians. In 1959, in one of his few pronouncements on the subject of his family, Fred Roti told the *Tribune,* "My father helped his relatives get city laborer jobs when no one else wanted the jobs in the '20s and '30s."

The paper noted that "Roti described his father as a 'leader of the neighborhood,' rather than a gangster."

By the time Bruno died, in 1957, he was a part of the lurid, often apocryphal history of Chicago crime. He merited an entry in the 1950 underworld guide *Chicago Confidential.* Columnist Mike Royko referred to him as "The Bomber." Federal agent-turned-author William Roemer, Jr., said Bruno was called "The Don." A modern-day reference, *Chicago Politics Ward by Ward,* goes so far as to describe Bruno as a "former Alderman." (He wasn't.)

Kenneth Allsop's more sober treatise on our Prohibition days, *The Bootleggers,* notes simply that Bruno was a beer runner, ward heeler, and ex-Capone executive who was remarkable only because he died peacefully in his bed at home.

When Bruno died, the *Tribune* said, "the mantle of his underworld command dropped upon his son-in-law, Frank 'Skid' Caruso." By then, others in the Roti clan were attracting government scrutiny. One of the alderman's nephews, also named Fred Roti, was convicted in the robbery of a woman who was then gang raped by his cohorts. (Roti did not participate in the rape: He stated to police that the woman did not appeal to him, so he simply waited for the others.) Cousin Frank Roti was arrested for running bookie operations a few times—he was once found hiding in a closet during a police raid. A James Roti—either the alderman's brother or a cousin, both of whom had criminal rec- *(continued on page 135)*

Fred Roti represents a way of life—the ancient, crummy way that gives a disreputable man wide leeway in City Hall.

FAMILY BUSINESS

continued from page 117

ords and who were born a few years apart—was identified in a 1963 Senate report as a member of Chicago's organized crime syndicate. Also named in that report were the alderman's brothers-in-law James and Skid Caruso.

In 1952, Mayor Martin Kennelly set up a committee to rid the city of what *The Sun* called "employees beholden to hoodlum-flavored political elements." Roti's brother Frank, then a civil service physical examiner, was the first fired by Kennelly's committee. On civil service questionnaires, he'd said he had no arrest record; in fact, he had been charged with gambling offenses three times, and once in connection with a murder—though none of those cases resulted in a conviction. He evidently died a humble man. County probate records show that his estate consisted of one Buick (which was divided somehow among his seven surviving siblings), a little stock, two gold rings, a small interest in a South Side slum building that Bruno had owned, and enough money to pay for his bronze casket.

At Frank's 1966 wake—as at the wakes of Bruno and James—policemen scurried through the parking lot, taking down the license plate numbers of the mourners in attendance. Cars registered to reputed mobsters Charles Nicoletti and Joseph "Shorty" LaMantia were there, according to a police Intelligence Division report, and also the car of our alderman, Fred Roti, who was of only passing interest at the time. The police report noted that Roti had been arrested only once, on a gambling charge, on June 8, 1953.

The details of that case are lost forever.

AT A VERY EARLY AGE, FRED ROTI BEGAN practicing the art of invisibility.

James Mezilson, his grade-school and high-school classmate, puts it this way: "He wasn't a jock. He wasn't artsy. In civic endeavors, I did not run into him at all." Mezilson shrugs. "He was one of those who stuck to the old neighborhood."

The Englewood High School 1938 yearbook shows that Roti was active in no clubs, no activities, no sports.

He has not appeared at any of his high-school reunions. Since he is a well-known alderman, a few classmates once tracked him down in City Hall and tried to get him on a reunion committee. Roti had no time for them whatsoever. "He had what you would call no comment," says classmate Frank Pratapas. "I guess he was too busy closing alleys in his neighborhood and get-

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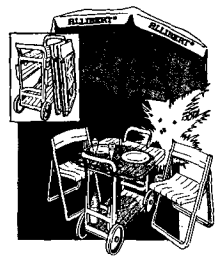
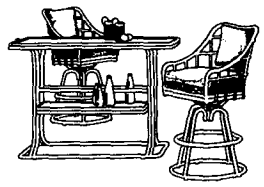
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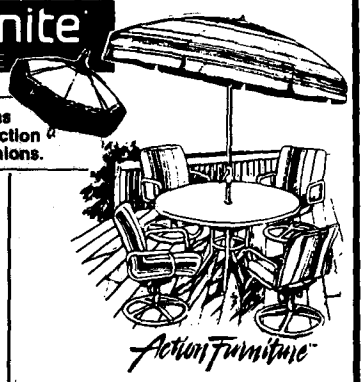
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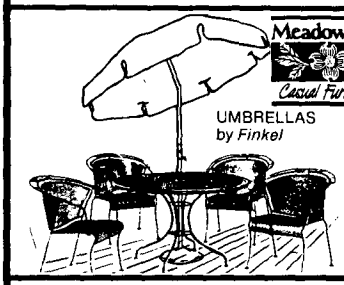
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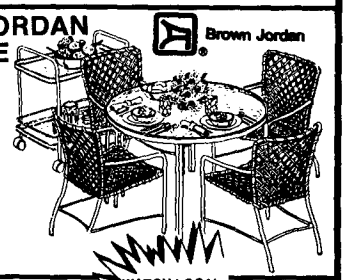

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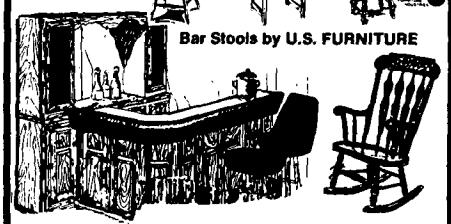
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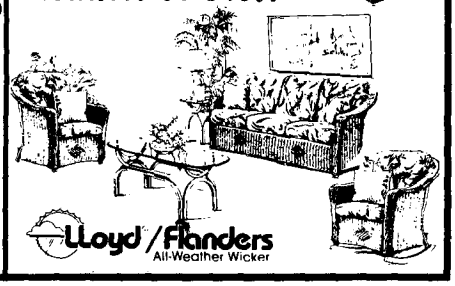
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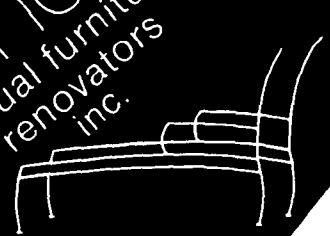
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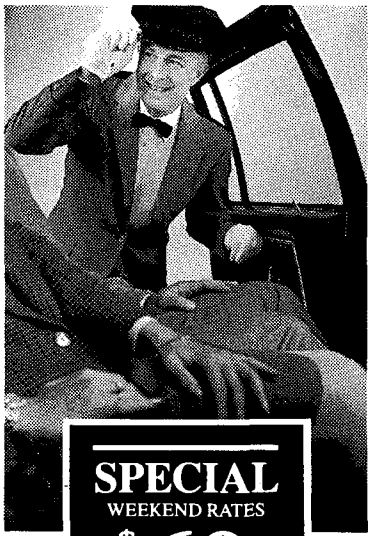

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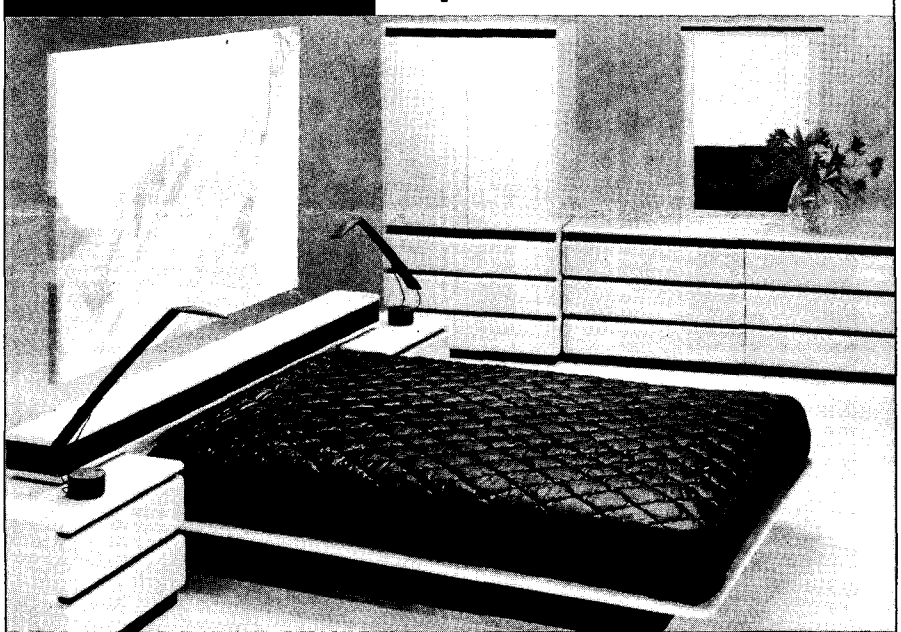

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ting jobs for his whole clan over there. He refused to do anything for the class. He was strictly Fred Roti for himself. We were very disappointed."

It is usually reported that Roti has a B.A. degree from DePaul University. DePaul records show that he attended college for only two years. During World War Two he served in the army's finance division, then began a string of undistinguished patronage jobs.

In the spring of 1950, the First Ward Regular Democratic Organization pulled him like a rabbit from out of their trick bag.

Back then, the first state senatorial district encompassed most of the First and Second wards and was about 80 percent African American. A respected African-American businessman, Dr. Edward Welters, Jr., had entered the Democratic primary with the understanding that he would have the support of Congressman William Dawson, the South Side's political powerhouse. Four months before the primary, Welters went to the Chicago Crime Commission with a most disturbing tale. He said in sworn affidavits that Dawson had offered him $10,000 to drop out of the race, then, when he refused, upped the offer to $15,000. Welters refused again, he said, and Dawson told him he was on his own. Shortly thereafter, the Regulars slated Roti. Welters was a consequential candidate: He had won tremendous African-American loyalty a few years earlier when, as a Republican state representative, he resigned from the party on the floor of the House to protest its opposition to an antidiscrimination bill.

Roti, a politically unknown Revenue Department employee, won handily.

(Those were the days when, according to Chicago Crime Commission reports, Skid Row winos voted for one dollar, voted twice for two dollars, and sometimes circled back again.)

State senator Roti served three terms with a record of continued invisibility. He was appointed to a total of ten Senate committees, but never made the rank of even vice-chairman on any of them. The press had him down as a staunch supporter of the West Side bloc—the group of state lawmakers, some of whom had flauntable Mob ties, who voted or filibustered down all anti-crime legislation. In 1956, following a redistricting, Roti stepped down, and was given a high-paying patronage job with the city Sewer Department.

In 1968, the organization hauled Roti up

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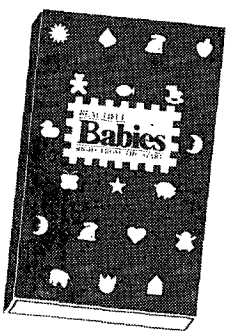

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again, after their other choices for the alderman's spot were forced out by press revelations of gangland ties. He has not faced a serious challenge for his seat since.

PUT ASIDE THE OUTLAW LEGACY, AND PUT aside the pending allegations: Has Roti tended to his ward? The answer depends on who you talk to—or where they live. "The alderman has never failed to come through," says Judy Hoch, a South Loop community organizer. She says he has seen that sidewalks are patched, potholes filled, junk cars towed, trees trimmed, and Girl Scout troops greeted with high ceremony.

"When I first became president of the Town Homes Condo Association," says attorney and community organization leader Joseph Spingola, "I sat down with him and said, I think you and I can get more done over a cup of coffee than in all the letter writing and petition gathering in the world." Roti solves the toughest problems, Spingola says, simply by lifting the phone.

He has lavished perhaps his closest attention on the tidy blocks around 25th Place and Wentworth, at the southern tip of the ward, where he lives, near a number of his relatives and a bevy of city workers. Roti's street is closed off to through traffic—not in the usual place, at the end of the block, but just a few doors past his house, so that not even the alleys provide access to his cul-de-sac. The alleys, if you care to know, are scrupulously maintained.

As for the bulk of the ward—the part we think of as our bustling downtown—one civic watchdog group says Roti has given it over to the big-time developers: "On zoning issues, we've sent letters and presented testimony, but in most cases he goes along with the wishes of developers," says Edward Lawrence of Friends of Downtown. "Let's face it, developers are the people with money to contribute."

And contribute they do. An examination of zoning records and campaign contributions reveals that in most cases—22 out of 37—those requesting First Ward zoning variances between 1985 and 1987 also doled out funds to Roti's campaign coffers (usually just $200 or $300 a shot).

"The only direction he's given to downtown development is to say, First come to me," says Spencer Weber Waller, a resident of Printer's Row and former member of the U.S. Justice Department's Organized Crime Strike Force, now in private practice. Waller, like Hoch and Spingola, is mentioned as a possible successor to Roti,

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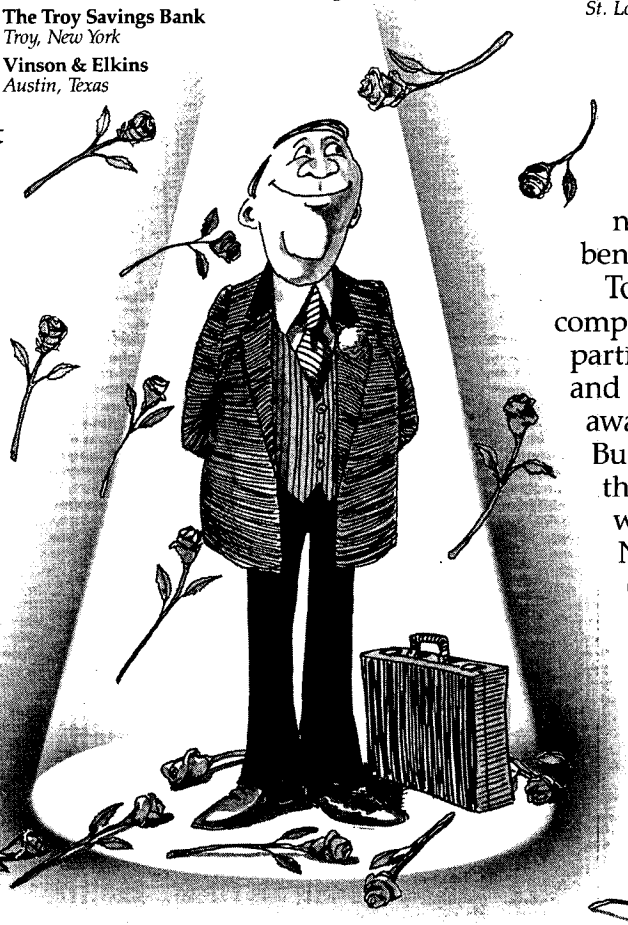

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should the alderman be asked to step down before 1991.

Those three would likely all draw their main support from the ward's gentrified precincts, whose votes are currently estimated at half the total. Another potential candidate is Jacqueline Russell, a community activist who spoke up for the ward's many project residents during last year's convulsive debates over the new South Loop elementary school. As Russell describes it, in this sprawling and most polyglot of wards—composed of yuppies, buppies, Chinese, Hispanics, project residents, Greek merchants, and old-world Italians—the 10,000-plus residents of the ABLA housing project have been shunted to last place on Roti's priority list. Russell shrugs. "It's just political," she says.

Put aside the outlaw legacy, and put aside the pending allegations: Has Roti tended to his ward? The answer depends on who you talk to—and where they live.

AT 4:30 A.M., WHEN THE SKY IS STILL A steely black, Fred Bruno Barbara is wheeling his "baby"—a brand-new, snow-white, chrome-trimmed Cadillac—through the yard of his trucking depot, hollering at the hapless men who haul the city's trash.

"Yo!" he shouts to one. "Your signal lights are off!" He spins the Caddy like a bumper car, and screeches to a halt behind another truck. "Yo! You in a road race, or what?" He punches the buttons on one of his two cellular phones, and his dispatcher answers right away. "Take Nappy off the six-wheeler and put him on sewers," Barbara growls. "Take Chino off sewers if you need a six-wheeler guy."

He manages a fleet of bright-orange 20-ton dump trucks. He is an indispensable element in Chicago's sanitation operation, a key cog in the city that works.

Without him, a Streets and Sanitation veteran confides, the city would shut down.

He is one of Alderman Roti's nephews—one of the many scions of the family who are helping this city to run. As they have been in the past, and are at present, many of Roti's relatives will be essential to the city's future. According to personnel records, at

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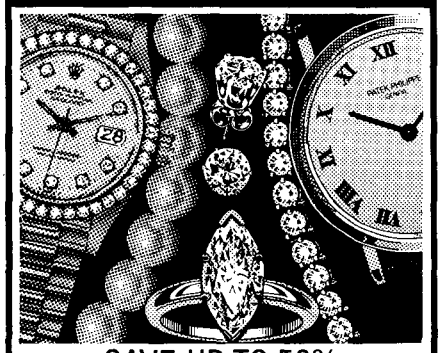

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least 29 Roti family members have worked for the city since 1960, and at least 16 have worked for the county. Most of them have impeccable reputations.

Yet some Roti family members are often in the news.

There is Roti's nephew Frank "Tootsie" Caruso—Skid Caruso's son—who is president of Laborers Local 1006. He has been indicted but acquitted of participating in an allegedly Mob-related extortion scheme.

There are Roti's son Bruno and his son-in-law John Walz. In 1980, they were called before a county grand jury investigating allegations by a former police official that First Ward politicians hampered his attempts to reform the Police Department motor pool, where Bruno was a foreman and Walz was also employed. According to a *Chicago Tribune* report, the official testified that his career had plummeted after he disciplined Bruno and Walz for returning drunk from a four-hour lunch; the official added that two policemen were almost killed when the brakes failed on a police car that Walz had falsely reported having fixed.

Walz is still working for the city. In 1980, Roti's son Bruno was indicted along with eight other motor pool employees in a massive phony billing and mail-fraud scheme. A day before the trial, Bruno pleaded guilty to two of the seven counts filed against him, admitting to falsifying $10,000 worth of invoices on behalf of a body shop that was paid for work it did not perform. (The shop, by coincidence, put $10,000 worth of free repairs and parts into a souped-up 1972 Vega Bruno owned.) During the trial, an assistant U.S. attorney said that the central figure in the case, a top-level civilian police chief, had "substantial information with respect to organized crime and First Ward corruption," but was refusing to share it with the government.

Bruno was sentenced to a work release program, and got a job at his cousin Freddie Barbara's truck lot. Bruno later was given a $35,000-a-year Water Department job in the waning days of Mayor Jane Byrne's administration. The department's commissioner explained that Bruno "came with a letter" from Alderman Roti.

"He's a good boy," Roti told the press. "I've got nothing else to say."

Barbara, the garbage-hauling man, has faced an extortion charge of his own: In 1982, Federal prosecutors cited records showing, they said, that he was a "major participant" in a gambling operation overseen in part by Joseph "Shorty" LaMantia.

But jurors did not believe that LaMantia, a soft-spoken man described in government reports as a member of the city's crime syndicate, actually threatened the gambler from whom he was collecting a $50,000 debt, and so LaMantia, Barbara, and the other codefendants were acquitted.

To tour Barbara's empire today is to examine the bowels of this city. His company, Fred Barbara Trucking, is under contract to run two of the city's four "garbage transfer stations." Twice a day the sky-blue city alley trucks dump their five-ton loads into his lots; the garbage is scooped into Barbara's 18-wheeler trucks, which run most of it out of town.

He also oversees the Metropolitan Water Reclamation District's sewage treatment sites in suburban Hodgkins, where acres of excrement are pushed around by slime-covered tractors. The waste is aerated, sun-dried, rototilled, piled into 18-wheelers, then hauled away to downstate Illinois.

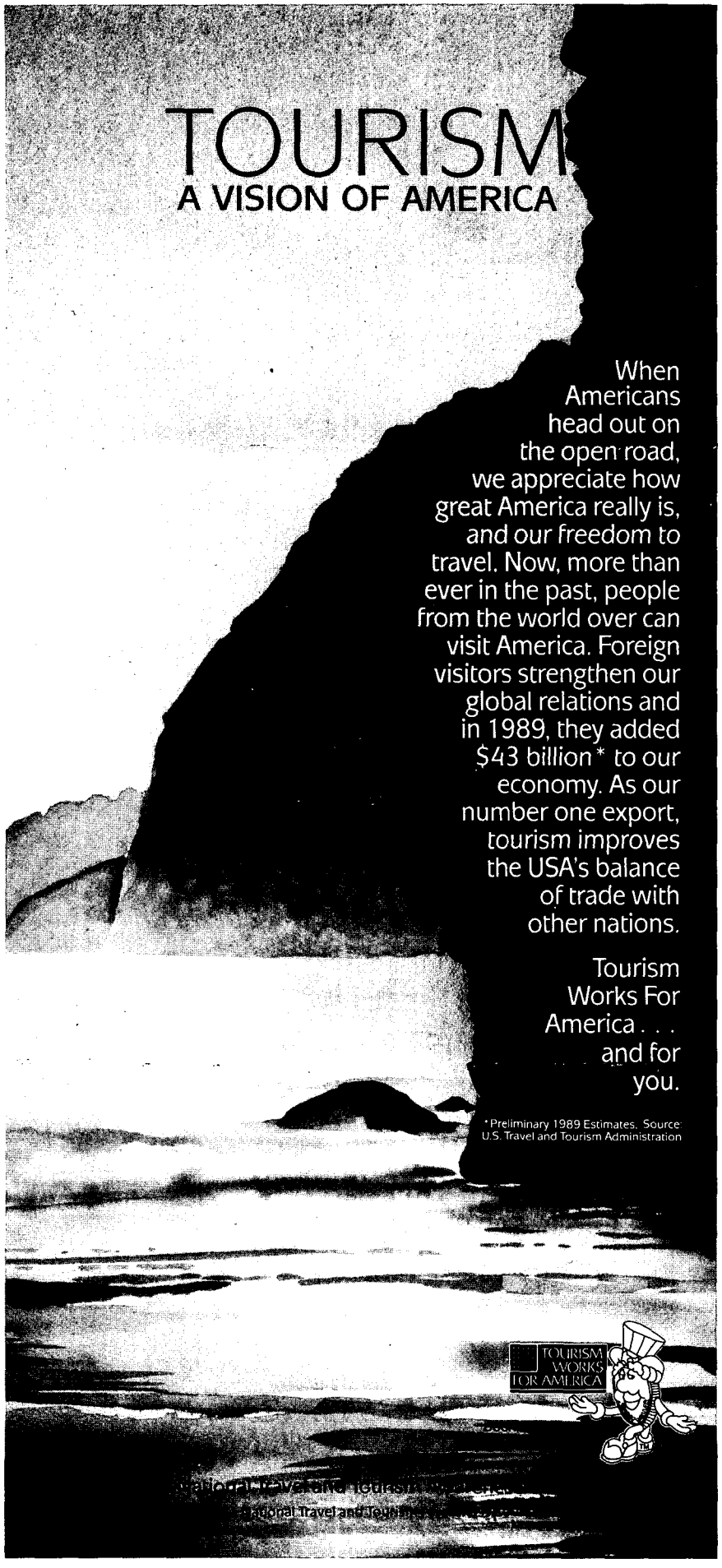
Barbara and his partner, Michael Tadin—a deputy sheriff who also owns an ostensibly competitive firm that hauls city waste—jointly own hundreds of acres of vacant South Side land, some of which they lease to the city for its auto towing program.

Barbara is a straightforward, forceful, entirely likable man. He works 14-hour days and many six-day weeks. "I have never been away from my business more than two days," he says. "Every couple of years, I take a Friday and a Monday off, but I'm not taking any two-week vacations or nothing like that."

When he discusses his extortion charge, his eyes smart and his voice takes on a wounded tone. LaMantia "was my softball coach," he says. "I've known him since I was five years old. He sounded like he was in trouble and he needed help."

He says, "The only time I got in trouble was ten years ago, and I'm still paying for it." He shows me canceled checks and other receipts from the tens of thousands of dollars he gives each year to charities, and a letter from a recipient who tells him, "Too bad the truth doesn't make good news."

He pulls the Caddy over on the bridge at 31st Street and Damen Avenue, where a ragamuffin boy is hawking newspapers. The boy hands him a *Sun-Times* without asking for a cent. "See that!" Barbara says. "In the winter I give the kid coffee and let him warm up in our offices." He shows me a wad of bills in his hip pocket—most of which will be dispensed to truckers for their lunch money. "Would you believe I go



FAMILY BUSINESS

through $150 in a morning here? If they don't have money for lunch, they get depressed and go home."

A driver in greasy overalls approaches him, and asks to borrow three dollars. Barbara eyes him up and down. "When you going to pay it back? Never!" he caws. He gives him the money. Then he turns to me. "And you want to write an article and tell everybody I was indicted for extortion, whatever it was."

He is a man in the model of his uncle the alderman—one who dispenses a thousand small favors each day, who goes to the limit for those within his family circle, who scoffs at the so-called war on organized crime. He bristles at the suggestion that he has won any city business through his uncle. He says, "You can go ask anyone in city sewer, water, or purchasing, and ask if I got business because of my uncle. I didn't. It's a hardship, really."

He says, "No disrespect to my uncle. I love him. But do you see him here at 4:30 in the morning? I'm not looking for credit, but I didn't accomplish this because someone helped me."

He says, "What should I do, disown him?"

But after I leave Barbara, I visit Jesus Garcia, the alderman of a ward where Barbara recently tried to expand his garbage transfer operation. Barbara's effort was ultimately blocked by neighborhood residents working with Garcia. During the controversy, I ask the alderman, did Roti ever lobby you on Barbara's behalf?

Garcia, usually classified as one of the staunchest and most outspoken progressives in the City Council, suddenly gets a defensive look in his eyes. He blinks and says, "You'll have to understand: I cannot comment on that."

Barbara, when asked again, insists that he did not ask his uncle to lobby Garcia on his behalf. Then his voice softens. "Let me say this here," he says. Roti "has probably 30 nephews. And if he was sitting in his office and he could help any one of them—in the most righteous way—he would just do it on his own. You really don't know him. It's like having two fathers. If your father thought he could help you in any kind of way, he would do it without you asking. That's the way he feels, too. It's not like you have to go to him and say, I want this done.

"You'd have to—how would I say?—be part of the family to realize how it is." ~

David Jackson is a senior editor for Chicago.

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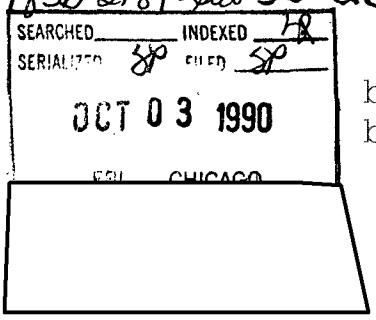

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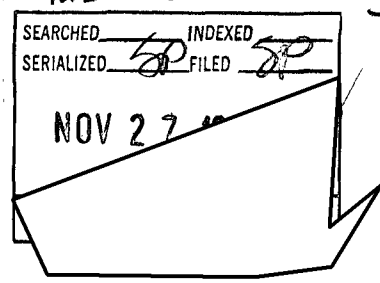

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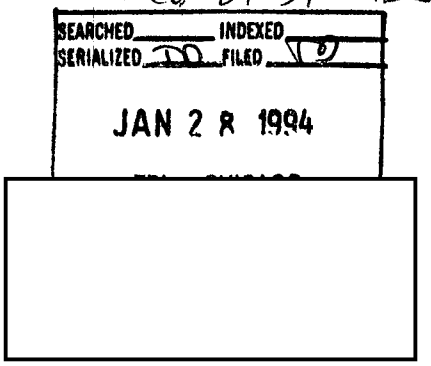

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